

News release

All systems go to celebrate the International Year of Physics in South Africa

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It is all systems go to celebrate the International Year of Physics in South Africa.

Science and Technology Director General, Rob Adam says the United Nations-declared International Year of Physics 2005 (IYP2005) will be promoted in South Africa under the slogan 'It's Your Physics' and activities will aim to popularise physics and illustrate its importance in everyday life.

"For too long the perception that physics is difficult and is meant for the very clever has existed, resulting in far too few students choosing physics as a study option or a career choice.

"Only last year an international panel of scientists, consisting of experts from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France and South Africa, said that by revitalising physics in South Africa, both under and post-graduate student numbers will rise and research funding will increase.

"Physics should be popularised for the public to understand, bursary schemes minimising the financial barriers for students to enter and remain in physics revised, and a national research information network to enable non-commercial research and a national research library resource created.

"Very importantly, teaching mathematics and science in primary and secondary schools should be encouraged, a demographically representative workforce developed whilst employment opportunities in physics should be communicated clearly," says Adam.

At the SASOL SciFest in March and the National Science Week in May, particular attention will be given to secondary learners, while a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the South African Institute of Physics will focus on everyday uses of physics. The South African Post Office will issue a special postage stamp to mark this occasion.

Some 150 international physicists will gather in Cape Town in October for the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics conference. The conference circuit will culminate in the World Conference on Physics and Sustainable Development in Durban at the end of October.

Museums, planetariums and science centres will also take part in the programme with specific projects to be announced by the end of February.

To demonstrate that physics can be fun and is an essential part of everyday life, projects like the development of a physics board game, a travelling lecture on *physics in film*, and an interactive exhibition on the *physics of toys* will be presented.

A learners' competition where the winners will be able to attend the official opening in November of South Africa's Large Telescope (SALT) in Sutherland in the Northern Cape – the culmination of the South African celebrations of the IYP2005 – is being envisaged. SALT and its twin installation in Texas, are among the biggest optical telescopes in the world.

When announcing the matric results last year, Education Minister Naledi Pandor said there were more passes in maths and science at the higher grade in 2004 than in 2003, an indication that the department's national strategy to improve maths and science is beginning to bear fruit.

“However, we will have to drastically improve this tendency if South Africa is to meet the demands for physicists and scientists in the near future. We trust that the ‘It's Your Physics’ programme will create an environment to stimulate budding physicists to enter this career field and help make South Africa competitive in this field.

“The physics community in South Africa is remarkably resilient. Despite problems, there are some areas of research at universities and institutes that are internationally competitive, while others are of a good national standard. The physics research and teaching community is talented and if augmented by enthusiastic younger people, will be able to take advantage of the new possibilities that are unfolding,” Adam says.

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Issued by: Ben Rootman
 Junxion Communications
 Tel: +27 12 342 0456
 Cell: +27 82 551 4853
 e-mail: ben@junxionpr.co.za
 For: South African Agency for Science and Technology
 Advancement
 Collette Vosloo
 Tel: +27 12 392 9300
 Cell: 083 432 9066
 e-mail: collette@saasta.ac.za

Visit: www.saip.org.za